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AUTHOR Rosenfeld, Anne H.
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ABSTRACT

Part of a series on early childhood demonstration programs designed to improve early parent-child relationships, stimulate positive child development, and prevent later behavior difficulties, the pamphlet describes the Mother-Child Home Program, in which low-income mothers are educated to become more effective developmental guides for their 2 to 4 year old children. The program consists of trained home visitors making twice-weekly visits to the family's home to demonstrate growth-promoting play skills involving specific toys and books designed for the parent and child to use together, and which are provided for the family. These home visits are discussed in detail. Other program aspects covered include staffing (mostly with unpaid volunteers) and facilities and supplies. In a series of followup studies designed to assess the program's impact, it was found that program graduates surpassed untreated children in every measured outcome, including reading and arithmetic achievement, social-emotional competence, and IQ. (DLS)

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Parent-Child Program Series

Report No.1

National Institute of Mental Health

Mother–Child Home Program

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Parent-Child Program Series

Report No. 1
Mother-Child Home Program

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Science Writer:	Anne H. Rosenfeld Contract No. TOPLD-13691-76 from the National Institute of Mental Health

Center for Studies of Child and Family Mental Health
National Institute of Mental Health
5600 Fishers Lane
Rockville, Maryland 20857

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Preface

Families and Professionals as Partners pamphlets represent an effort on the part of the Center for Studies of Child and Family Mental Health, National Institute of Mental Health, to make visible successful models of programs which enable families to play an important role in improving child mental health. Each pamphlet describes a practical program that can be adapted to local community needs. The present Parent-Child Program Series of five pamphlets describes demonstration programs involving young children from infancy through preschool. The general goals of the series include improving early parent-child relationships, stimulating positive social-emotional development, and preventing later behavior difficulties. This reflects the center's goal of encouraging the utilization of recent research findings by service providers and families to help improve child mental health in their communities.

Joy G. Schulterbrandt
Chief
Center for Studies of Child and Family
Mental Health

PARENT-CHILD PROGRAM SERIES

Introduction

Our Nation's children are a precious but often underdeveloped natural resource. Since the 1960's, social conscience and new scientific insights have converged to spark exploration and demonstration of many new ways to enhance the early years of childhood. Spurred by child development research that marked the pre-school years as the cornerstone for subsequent cognitive and emotional development, a number of action and evaluation programs have begun with Federal funding to discover effective ways to stimulate psychological growth in infants and young children. Although many of these programs have been geared toward children from poverty backgrounds, they can help in better development for all children. Head Start, Follow Through, and Sesame Street are among the most famous of these large-scale programs.

Less familiar, perhaps, has been another line of exploration; although more modest in scope, it is comparable in developmental impact: educating parents to work and play with their young children so that their youngsters may grow as thinking, feeling individuals. Many of the programs have been sponsored by the National Institute of Mental Health, which has long recognized that starting children at a very early age on the right developmental footing may prevent later emotional and intellectual problems.

More than a decade of experiment and study has yielded a wealth of parent-involved programs for early childhood enrichment. Their efficacy is well documented. They work—and they can work in new settings and communities as well. The question now is: Will we let them work? Are there people who care enough about children in their own communities to carry these programs forward? We have made great strides as a Nation in providing better opportunities for children to grow up physically healthy. But, for all too many preschoolers, critical formative years are passing without the stimulation and guidance required for healthy emotional and mental development. As innumerable experimental programs have shown, parents can become eager and able teachers of their infants and children once they have learned how to translate their caring into skills and attitudes that actually help their children to develop. Many parents tend to underestimate their young children's abilities because they do not know how to bring them out into the open.

Good parenting does not come automatically with the birth of a child—or even many children. It is a skillful activity that, for many, takes some training. How to provide that training—in a number of different settings and for somewhat different children—is the subject of this series of pamphlets.

The approaches to parent training reported here grew out of research-demonstration programs supported by the National Institute of Mental Health. Having demonstrated their feasibility and worth, these approaches are now ready for use wherever there are communities willing to make a modest investment that may pay big, long-range dividends for their children. The specific training programs are for the most part relatively simple and inexpensive to implement, and they are likely to offer rich rewards not only to the children but to their parents as well. Because the skills parents acquire are easy to transmit, these programs potentially have a snowball effect: Each parent trained may transmit skills to other children and parents. Once a program has been established, recruitment is often unnecessary. Enthusiastic parents spread the word to others. Over and over these programs have met with great parent support because they provide them with the deeply gratifying ability to help their children make visible progress at home and later at school—often far more than parents thought possible.

This report provides an overview of one approach to parent training, but only its highlights. More detailed information is available. We will describe the program as it was carried out in its original setting as a research-demonstration project, but, as you will see, many variations on the theme are possible, depending on local community needs and resources.

Parent training programs are no panaceas. But they represent needed ways to start young children on the right developmental path—stimulating their curiosity, rewarding their explorations and little triumphs, guiding mind, hand, and eye, indeed the whole child, toward greater understanding, confidence, and competence. Both parents and their young children can learn a form of communication that enriches and delights.

Mother-Child Home Program

For many of our Nation's children, growing up poor has been a one-way ticket to failure. They have entered school ill-equipped to cope with its demands and emerged, many years later, as unemployed and unemployable dropouts, the vanguard of a new poverty generation. We now know that this tragic cycle can often be broken if children from low-income families enter the school years ready and eager for learning. There are many ways to stimulate that readiness, but they all have a common denominator: Very early in the life of such children someone must take the time to develop their natural intelligence, curiosity, confidence, and love of learning by talking and playing with them in ways that encourage mental and emotional growth. With the right guidance, children can show strong developmental gains, before the school years, which may be sustained later.

One of the most promising approaches, which appears to make a difference in improving children's later school performance, is to educate the parents of preschoolers in low-income families to become more effective guides for their toddlers' development. If trained home visitors—often parents from similar low-income backgrounds—come regularly to the home to demonstrate growth-promoting play skills, parents are likely to follow suit as they play with their youngsters. This approach, developed by the Mother-Child Program of Freeport, New York, was tried on a small-scale experimental basis in 1965. With funding from NIMH, and later from other sources, it has since undergone a decade of refinement and replication and has proven its feasibility and its effectiveness in improving parenting skills. The program has elicited widespread national interest because it often yields striking developmental improvements at modest cost. For a relatively small investment, it is possible to nurture children's intellectual development, lessen behavior problems, and pave the way for sustained good school performance well into the third grade and possibly beyond.

How do all these benefits come about? They arise when a low-income parent and a preschool child participate in a carefully planned 2-year program of progressive activities developed by Dr. Phyllis Levenstein, a child development expert, to compensate for a commonly found problem in low-income homes: Many parents, although naturally concerned about their children's development,

do not know how best to aid that development. Often they underestimate their own children's capabilities and do not recognize that even the very young need to engage in conversation and to be guided in their play in special ways if they are to develop essential thinking and attitudinal skills. The program is designed to help parents express their caring and love by showing them a new repertoire of behavior that will stimulate these skills in their children.

The program has several essential ingredients:

- Low-income parents with 2- to 4-year-olds who agree to participate in the program
- A staff of specially trained paraprofessional "Toy Demonstrators" who conduct regular home visits, work with parent and child, and serve as role models for the parents
- A carefully specified array of curriculum materials (toys and books designated as Verbal Interaction Stimulus Materials" or VISM) for the parent and child to keep and use together, with guidance from the Toy Demonstrator
- A supervisor and trainer to organize and run the program and assure that it uses techniques shown to be effective in the original demonstration project and its replications. For example, toys and books used in the program, although not rigidly prescribed, must be selected to meet certain explicit criteria; similarly, the Toy Demonstrators must be trained to present the materials in a particular order and manner to assure the program's best impact.

Home Visits

At the core of the Mother-Child Home Program is the home visit by a Toy Demonstrator, which usually occurs twice a week during the school year and extends over a 2-year period. During the first visit of each week, a new toy is demonstrated. The second visit is a review session in which older materials are explored. Although the program is carefully structured, in practice the home visits leave ample room for spontaneity, fun, and joy. Let us take a sample of these home visits, first from the parent's perspective, then from that of the Toy Demonstrator:

> Mrs. Jones, like many parents in the program, lives on welfare in a low-income housing project with several children ranging in age from 2½ to 15 years. She signed up for the program to help Jason, her "baby," hoping that he would do better in school than some of her other children. (Tommy, her eldest, recently dropped out of high school.) Mrs. Blue, the Toy Demonstrator, has been coming to the house twice a week for about 6 months

and at each visit brings a "gift" they can keep—either a toy or a book. (The gifts are stored in a special toy box, also a gift.) Whenever Jason hears Mrs. Blue at the door he gets excited, because she always brings something new and special. He still likes to "read" his "Pat the Bunny" book, his very first present, but this week Mrs. Jones and Jason are working with a new puzzle of trains and trucks, learning their names, and fitting them into the right shaped holes.

When Mrs. Blue comes, she usually sits down between Jason and his mother, shows them the new toy or book and how to use it, and asks him questions about it. When she brought the "Snowy Day" book she read the title, showed him how to turn the pages and treat it, and read very slowly and clearly to him. At each picture she asked him to name things like colors and shapes, and asked him questions like "What's that?" or "Do you like snow?" After a while, Mrs. Blue would hand over the book or toy to Mrs. Jones, asking her to continue with Jason in the same way. At first she used to be embarrassed, but now she feels more comfortable about playing with Jason in front of Mrs. Blue. As she learned to do early in the visits, Mrs. Jones lets Jason know he's doing great each time he does something right—hugging him or telling him it's O.K. Sometimes he gets restless or silly, and she tries not to push or punish him if he's not in the right mood. But to Mrs. Jones' great surprise and delight Jason, her baby, is making great strides. He knows more and can tell her more than any of her others when they were that little. He's starting out right.

From the Toy Demonstrator's vantage point, a home session might go like this one:

Nancy ran to my Toy Demonstrator bag as I entered the doorway. She knew it was time for a new toy. While she was taking the toy, a musical instrument, out of the bag, mother and I sat on the sofa. Mrs. H. told the child what the instrument is called, and added "Now you have your own," also telling me how Nancy always liked to bang on her older brother's drum. The first thing Nancy did with the tom-tom was to put it on her head and start shaking the bells, moving about as though she were marching. Mother and I immediately caught on and marched behind her singing "Onward, Christian Soldiers" and making the hand salute. We continued singing all different types of songs and playing the musical instrument. Mrs. H. suggested an African dance. We rolled up our pant legs while Nancy put the bells on her leg. Mrs. H. beat the tom-tom, I

clapped my hands. We stood in a straight line, moving forward and backward, shaking our bodies, and singing woo-la, la la la . . . la. Upon leaving I was still dancing with my hand up singing woo-la la, lala.

Or perhaps like this:

Again, this session was a very good one in terms of mother participation and the verbal interaction between Mrs. P. and Doug. Mrs. P. and I took turns taking a page. She would read the story and then talk about the picture. For instance, on the horse and colt page she covered concepts of mother and child and related it to her and Doug: size (big and small), number, labels (horse, colt, mane, window pane, spider, flies, web), relationships. Then Doug would get up and pretend to be each animal with its distinguishing characteristic and sound. With the goose he stretched his neck as long as it would go, with the rabbit we twitched our noses, wiggled our ears, and hopped on the floor.

Underlying the easygoing and casually styled home visits is a carefully thought-out approach based both on theoretical and experimental foundations. Each Toy Demonstrator has undergone an eight-session training workshop, learning about the psychosocial development of 2- and 3-year-olds, the relation of language to cognitive development, the nature of mother-child interaction, the major features of the program, and specific plans for the first meeting with a parent and child. They also receive a VISIT (Verbal Interaction Stimulus Intervention Techniques) Handbook which sums up the main points of the training sessions and cumulatively holds a collection of guide sheets for using particular VISM materials. Each week the Toy Demonstrators attend a conference with their supervisor at which a new VISM is demonstrated. They are given a guide sheet for that VISM which outlines procedures to be followed during the next home session. Each guide sheet contains a list of contents and techniques to be communicated; all follow a similar philosophy and educational approach, but are adapted to the particular toy or book used that week. The Toy Demonstrators are encouraged to bring their own creativity into play in shaping the procedure to the individual parents and children with whom they are working. In all of the home sessions, emphasis is given to stimulating the child to use words in many ways—especially naming. But the program is designed to stimulate other aspects of development as well, such as curiosity, imaginativeness, independence, attentiveness, decisionmaking, and self-control.

The VISM (Verbal Interaction Stimulus Materials) for the program are chosen yearly by the senior staff member about 10 months before they are to be used. Two sets of VISM are selected: 23 toys

and books for the 2-year-olds in the first-year program, and a comparable number of more advanced selections for the 3-year-olds in the second-year program. These materials must satisfy a number of practical criteria such as safety, durability, and easy care. In addition they must be intrinsically attractive to children and must permit and induce a number of types of verbal, perceptual, motor, and conceptual stimulation. Typical toys might include a block cart, hammer and pegs, hand puppets, puzzles, and simple musical instruments. The books, selected to draw children into more symbolic activities, rely particularly on strong attractive illustrations to elicit and sustain interest and participation, although they also have some rudimentary texts.

Program Staffing

The Mother-Child Home Program requires a minimum of professional staffing: one full-time program supervisor-coordinator for a program serving 80 children. Most of the staffing—the Toy Demonstrators—can be drawn from several sources, including low-income mothers who have already been parent participants (most likely high school graduates or less) as well as middle- and upper-income volunteers. The average annual cost of the Program is less than $700 for each child. Because the program is staffed largely with unpaid volunteers, it can be run at an even more modest cost. A program serving 80 children could be run well with 20 part-time volunteer Toy Demonstrators and two full-time paid Toy Demonstrators. The only staffing, in addition to the program supervisor-coordinator, would be one half-time secretary-clerk to coordinate schedules, handle correspondence, and keep track of curricular materials.

Facilities and Supplies

The program requires modest office space: an office for the program supervisor, space for secretarial activities, one large conference room for initial training and weekly conferences with Toy Demonstrators, and some space for toy storage. Beyond the usual office supplies, the program does require the purchase of toys and books that are used to stimulate parent-child interaction. Each child served by the program will require 23 toys and books per year, selected in accordance with pre-established criteria and included in the low annual cost. The project's initiators stress the use of commercially available materials rather than homemade curriculum

supplies because they lend themselves to easy program replicability and adaptation, require no extra effort by parents to make them, and tend to remain more durable and interesting to children, parents, and Toy Demonstrators than homemade toys.

Program Impact

The Mother-Child Home Program was designed to enhance the intellectual, emotional, and social development of young children in order to prevent later learning and behavioral problems at school. From its inception in 1965, it has undergone careful study and evaluation to see whether the intended benefits arise and to discover the best form for achieving them. Over the decade since the program was first tried, it has undergone many replications—first by its originators, who, after the pilot study in 1965, conducted yearly replications from 1967 to 1977, and later by others (in consultation with Dr. Levenstein and her staff) at over 50 sites throughout the United States. A wealth of data collected by the staff of the program's research wing, the Verbal Interaction Project, gives us a picture of the program's short- and long-term effects on children.

Some of the program's replications, deliberately designed with some features varied, have permitted the investigators to identify which features work best in enhancing children's development. These studies have revealed that the active involvement of parents is crucial to the program's best long-term effects. Findings such as these suggest that those who wish to establish the program in their own communities should follow quite closely the format suggested by Dr. Levenstein.

What are the program's long-lasting effects on its child participants? How do its "graduates" do in school? To answer this question, followup studies have been conducted with several waves of graduates after they reached school age. Children in the first, second, and third grades who had participated in the full program from ages 2 to 4 for the most part have shown a sustained advantage over nonparticipants. According to Dr. Levenstein:

> The graduates of the full program consistently surpassed untreated subjects (those without the program) in every measured outcome. The program graduates were superior, reaching at least normal level in reading and arithmetic achievement, in social-emotional competence, and in IQ. They had far fewer school problems and generally showed more promise for good school achievement and sound mental health in the years ahead.

The research study revealed an added benefit; the lessons learned by parents with one child in the program were apparently spontaneously applied to younger ones as well. Thus, when younger brothers and sisters of children originally in the program later participated themselves, they started out with a special advantage: Their IQs were already significantly higher before the formal program than those of their siblings at a comparable age.

The program is still undergoing intensive research study to determine exactly how it affects children and their parents. Attention is being given to intellectual growth and to other aspects of development that seem to flower when parents and children are in good communication. Of particular interest are the ways that changes in parents' behavior bring about changes in their children. These studies should yield refined understanding of how parent education, at the right time and in the right form, can give children the skill and confidence to grow and keep on learning throughout the challenging years of school.

For Further Information

The Mother-Child Home Program and its research arm, the Verbal Interaction Project, have produced many publications describing the project and its impact on parents and children, as well as guidelines for establishing similar programs. Both general information and specific help in setting up replication studies can be obtained by writing to:

Dr. Phyllis Levenstein
Verbal Interaction Project
5 Broadway
Freeport, N.Y. 11520

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